



Behavioral Games Couples Play

Complainer - Procrastinator

Description:

In this game one partner makes a request—"Would you please take out the trash?" and the other partner agrees but doesn't follow-through – "Sure, I'll do it later." After asking over and over with no results, one spouse becomes the **Complainer** ("nag") while the other continues to postpone following through on their commitment and becomes the **Procrastinator**.

The game can be very destructive as anger mounts, avoidance begins and trust is undermined.

Example:

Complainer: "Can you help with the light bulb?"

Performer: "Sure, after this T.V. program."

Complainer: "I thought you were going to help with the light bulb!"

Performer: "I will help when it's convenient."

Complainer: "I can't count on you for anything."

Performer: "I'd help if you weren't such a nag."

"Benefits:"

The Complainer might keep playing the game to "prove" that the spouse can't be counted upon. This might be necessary in order (1) to gain attention as the **martyr** spouse, (2) to re-enforce the safety of the complainer's **self-reliance**, or (3) to justify certain **retaliation** behaviors—i.e., spending, temper, independence, etc. The "Procrastinator" often continues to play the game in order to prove that (1) the spouse is a "nag" and thus **justify** certain actions, (2) they will not be **controlled**, or (3) the complainer "needs" the spouse and thus the procrastinator is less fearful.

Opportunities to Stop Playing

I. Disengaging from the Game

The "**Complainer**" can disengage in the following way:

1. When requesting assistance from your spouse, lovingly clarify your time requirements.
Example: Honey, would you check my car this week before I make the trip next week?
2. If your spouse agrees but then doesn't follow through—lovingly point out that the job hasn't been done and a "final" time frame
Example: I can plan to take my car to the shop on Monday if it doesn't fit your schedule this weekend.



3. If your spouse still doesn't follow through—then implement another plan
 - Do the task yourself — guard against bitterness and retaliation
 - Hire the task done — don't gossip or become bitter, i.e., take your car to the shop on Monday
 - Let the task go undone — particularly if the "consequences" will affect your spouse also

The "**Procrastinator**" can disengage in the following way:

1. **Finish** the task you indicated you would do or
2. Honestly share your intentions "up front"
 - "I don't think I'll be able to."
 - "Let's plan to hire someone to do it."
 - "I want to do it and I need to resolve my anger so I can."
3. The Game is Over!

II. Address Underlying Issues

- **Unmet Needs** - Complainer may really need "attention" and to feel secure, but uses this game to "prove" the spouse's love. Procrastinator may have a need to be "needed/appreciated" and procrastinates to keep spouse "needing" him or her.
- **Unhealed Marital Hurts** - Both may have considerable unhealed hurt and anger; this game may be a form of retaliation on either or both parts; either may fear being honest about their "real" needs.
- **Faulty Thinking** - Complainer might "personalize" and "generalize": "Look at this messy house... I just know I'll never be treated special... No one will ever care about what's important to me." Procrastinator may also "generalize": "All women are complainers," or "personalize": "All I'm good for around here is to clean up."
- **Unhealed Childhood Hurts** - Complainer may have unhealed hurt over not feeling "special" in childhood - maybe lacked attention. Procrastinator may have unhealed anger at excessive complaining or control while growing up.



Behavioral Games Couples Play

"Hooked" by..Nothing's Wrong!

Description:

A classic way of drawing attention to unmet needs without being vulnerable is the "Nothing's Wrong" game. One partner conveys by facial expression, body language, attitude, "door slamming" or murmuring that **something is the matter!** When asked about it, their "nothing" response invites further questioning and the partner's attention. The partner is now "hooked" as constant questioning must pry information from the "nothing's wrong" partner. This childish game often erupts with anger if the "hooked" spouse comes to feel used or the "Nothing's Wrong" spouse is ignored.

Example:

Downcast Look —

"Nothing's the Matter — but I really would like a quiet talk."

Murmuring — "I'm just fine! — but I really need help with the kids."

Slamming Drawers — "I'll survive — but I really need empathy."

Sullen Attitude — "I'll handle it — but I really need support."

Quiet/Avoidant — "I'll get over it — but I really need an apology."

"Benefits:"

The "Nothing's Wrong" player continues to play to gain **attention** from a spouse and have the spouse "pry" from them important facts, issues or needs. This is much **less risky** than asking to talk or to vulnerably share needs. This player also remains in **control** of the situation since the game is played on their terms.

The "Hooked" player often benefits from this game in being insensitive/irresponsible until the partner begins this game. This player can always plead innocent that he/she didn't know anything was wrong!

Opportunities to Stop Playing

I. Disengaging from the Game

The "**Nothing's Wrong**" player can disengage in the following way:

1. Think through what your real need is
Example: support with kids; time alone with spouse; appreciation for a job well done; empathy over a rough day
2. Choose the right time to express your need
Example: privately; after spouse has relaxed; allow enough time



3. Lovingly express your need
Example: Now that you've relaxed, I need a few minutes to visit with you; I've had a rough day and need to tell you about it--so you can support and comfort me.
4. The Game is over!

The "**Hooked**" player can disengage in the following way:

1. Share the truth in love---when you first notice the game begin Example: Your tone of voice sure tells me something is going on.
2. Express your support and availability
Example: When you're ready to visit, let me know-I'd sure like to support you in whatever is troubling you.
3. Listen attentively/respond lovingly
Example: Undivided attention; eye contact; empathy; comfort; reassurance
4. The Game is over!

II. Address Underlying Issues

- **Unmet Needs** - Nothing's Wrong may have any number of needs: attention, support, appreciation, empathy, etc. The hooked player often lacks awareness of their own need and thus can be "oblivious" to other's needs.
- **Unhealed Marital Hurts** - Nothing's Wrong may have considerable fear about vulnerability sharing needs as well as hurt from previous games. Hooked may have considerable anger from previous games.
- **Faulty Thinking** - Nothing's Wrong may "personalize" everyday occurrences and "magnify" their importance. Hooked may tend to "minimize" his own emotional needs and thus everyone else's as well.
- **Unhealed Childhood Hurts** - Nothing's Wrong may have missed someone being sensitive to hurts and needs—and taking initiatives to ask about them—thus the games. Hooked likewise may have missed out on sensitive "giving" to meet needs—and thus ignores them or waits for "**dramatic**" cries for help.



Behavioral Games Couples Play

The Blame Game

Description

In this game which commonly has two players—each partner blames the other for something that is really his/ her responsibility.

The game usually begins by one partner in some way pointing out a problem, expressing a need or in any other way making reference to the partner's **responsibility**.

This reference to some responsibility is met by a justifying/rationalizing counter-attack of blame. This accusation provokes a similar blame attack—and the game is on!

Example:

"If it weren't for all your nagging, I'd come home earlier."

"If it weren't for all the nights I was left alone, I wouldn't have had an affair."

"I wouldn't say such hurtful things if you wouldn't provoke me."

"I wouldn't spend so much money shopping if I wasn't left alone so much."

"I'd spend more time with the kids if you wouldn't run me down in front of them."

"Benefits:"

The "Blame" game is played in order to avoid personal responsibility for one's own actions by diverting attention to your partner's behavior. By doing so, rationalizing one's inappropriate behavior is easier.

Another "benefit" is to avoid being "wrong" which to the perfectionistic or self-critical person is very important. Those with low self-esteem would be particularly vulnerable since to "admit wrong" would seem to be devastating.

Opportunities to Stop Playing

I. Disengaging from the Game

The "**Blamer**" can disengage in the following way:

1. Allow yourself to sense an accountability to God
Example: "Whatever you do—do heartily as unto the Lord" - Colossians 3:23
2. Assume responsibility for your behavior and attitudes
Example: "Create in me a clean heart of God and renew a steadfast spirit within me" - Psalm 51:10
3. Express apology and regret to your spouse
Example: "Confess your faults to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed" - James 5:16
4. The Game is Over!



The "**Blamed**" can disengage in the following way:

1. Receive any criticism your partner gives as an opportunity to assess your accountability with God
Example: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me-see if there be any hurtful way in me" - Psalm 139:23
2. Express to your partner an appropriate response to the criticism
Example: As for my part of our argument, I see where I said very hurtful words to you-and I regret that; it was wrong of me-will you forgive me?
3. Express the truth of your needs in a loving way
Example: I care so much about our relationship that it grieves me when I'm criticized in front of the kids; I feel hurt and disrespected; thanks for considering my feelings about it.
4. The Game is Over!

II. Address Underlying Issues

- **Unmet Needs** - Both players usually have major unmet emotional/relational needs—acceptance, affection, appreciation, attention, etc.—but unhealed hurt and anger blocks this level of vulnerability and so the focus is to criticize one another's behavior.
- **Unhealed Marital Hurts** - Major hurt and anger usually present—with anger at my spouse—"hiding" my own hurt and sadness; fear of being hurt more hinders genuine forgiveness and renewed openness.
- **Faulty Thinking** - "Polarized" thinking would not be uncommon since behaviors are evaluated very critically as black-or-white; all-or-nothing. "Emotional reasoning" and "personalizing" would also be common since fear is often felt and any criticism taken personally.
- **Unhealed Childhood Hurts** - Avoidance of personal responsibility is often a learned behavior as no one empathized or apologized to me growing up! Low self-esteem from a critical/hard-to-please environment or from a neglectful/under-involved environment might be common.



Behavioral Games Couples Play

Performer—Yes, But

Description:

This game is a common one with couples in a **power struggle**—as one gives suggestions and the other shoots them down. It often-times is played by couples who are anxious about closeness and use the game to avoid intimacy and personal responsibility.

The performer can become frustrated and angry and the "yes-but" person often feels unimportant and "martyred." Each player often "escapes" into other priorities—jobs, kids, church, hobbies, etc.—seeking to meet unmet emotional/relational needs.

Example:

Yes-But: I wish we could go out to dinner together sometime.

Performer: Let's plan on that this Friday.

Yes-But: It's so hard to get baby-sitters.

Performer: I can arrange for my sister to keep them.

Yes-But: I don't think she's very responsible ... Let's just forget it!

"Benefits:"

The "Yes-But" player might continue to play in order to **maintain attention** on unmet needs without having the needs met which would bring closeness and prompt **fear** that attention might no longer be given.

The "Performer" might continue to play out of a need for approval and appreciation—hoping that somehow these needs might be met if the effort is satisfactory.

As this game plays out neither person's real need gets met as loving attention, approval and appreciation go unmet.

Opportunities to Stop Playing

I. Disengaging from the Game

The "**Performer**" can disengage in the following way:

1. Lovingly reassure your spouse concerning your desire to "**help**"
Example: I really would like for us to go out together.
2. Present a maximum of three options
Example: We can go Friday or Saturday and I'll be glad to arrange the baby-sitter.
3. Gently delineate that your spouse is now "free" to decide and responsible for deciding
Example: Those are several options for how we could go out together. You think about it and decide.
4. The Game is Over!



The **"Yes–But"** can disengage in the following way:

1. Listen to the suggestions offered and think about them.
2. Either pick one of the suggestions or suggest one of your own.
3. Enjoy one of the suggested ideas as something positive rather than focusing on the negative of what you don't have or what won't work.
4. The Game is Over!

II. Address Underlying Issues

- **Unmet Needs** - The Yes-But player often feels such a magnitude of unmet needs that they don't really expect someone to freely and lovingly "give" to them—thus the need for the game. Performer often keeps playing out of needs for acceptance, approval and appreciation.
- **Unhealed Marital Hurts** - Fear of closeness and expressing genuine need would be common. Yes-But might have difficulty forgiving past hurt as fear hinders it. Performer might have unresolved anger and often be non-expressive of his emotions.
- **Faulty Thinking** - Yes-But might practice "emotional-reasoning" as fears seem like truth and "generalizing" as past disappointments "predict" the future. "Polarizing" might also be demanding perfection in selected ways.
- **Unhealed Childhood Hurts** - Yes-But may have considerable pain from unmet needs associated with a hurtful or neglectful environment—little unconditional "giving." Performer may have unresolved hurt from lack of approval and acceptance.



Behavioral Games Couples Play

Outdone by the Sweet Martyr

Description:

This game is played by the spouse who is overwhelmed by his/her own **"neediness."** Most every conversation is turned back toward "Sweet Martyr's" needs. The partner is "outdone" in every way as their needs, hurts and desires are "topped," minimized or ignored.

Sweet Martyr tends to ask about the spouse mainly to "be nice" or polite—while remaining self-absorbed.

"Outdone" might become angry, withdrawn or seek attention elsewhere.

Example:

Sweet Martyr: Well how was your day today?

Outdone: It was terrible; one of the worst I've had lately.

Sweet Martyr: Well, did you notice how clean the house is?

Sweet Martyr: You look tired—are you?

Outdone: 1 really am; 1 think I need to relax for a few minutes.

Sweet Martyr: I know what you mean; I'm exhausted; would you get me a pillow?

"Benefits:"

"Sweet Martyr" is "sweet" because that's what nice people do; but the game is played in an attempt to call attention to Martyr's perceived **abundance of needs without directly bringing up the need first.** Every discussion can turn into an opportunity to "flaunt" Martyr's needs.

Outdone plays in a desperate attempt to have some of his needs noticed. He often may **grow weary** in his attempts to meet Martyr's perceived needs.

Opportunities to Stop Playing

I. Disengaging from the Game

The **"Sweet Martyr"** can disengage in the following way:

1. Express a "wish" or desire to your spouse in a loving way—then appreciate the response.
Example: I've been missing us spending quality time together; let's look at our calendar and plan an evening alone.
2. Give undivided attention to learning of your partner's need
Example: Come set down, relax a minute and tell me about your day.
3. Give lovingly to help meet your partner's need
Example: It sounds like you really had a rough day; how can I best help? Take you to dinner? Let you rest quietly? Neck rub?
4. The Game is Over!



The "**Outdone**" can disengage in the following way:

1. Be lovingly assertive when you get the "Sweet Martyr" treatment
Example: I appreciate your asking about my day-so it really hurts when I then don't sense your genuine concern when I share
2. Express your need lovingly
Example: Can we sit down so I can share with you; I really need your understanding over a very rough day.
3. Be available to mutually give to your partner's need
Example: Now that I've shared that with you and sense your support—I'm encouraged to "give" to you; what would you enjoy?
4. The Game is Over!

II. Address Underlying Issues

- **Unmet Needs** - Sweet Martyr likely feels a multitude of unmet needs in spite of a spouse's giving—and will call attention to them at every opportunity. Outcome likewise has many unmet needs—attention, empathy, encouragement, etc., but is typically not open in verbalizing them.
- **Unhealed Marital Hurts** - Sweet Martyr would often have considerable fear that needs would ever be noticed and freely given to; forgiveness might be difficult. Outdone might be frustrated and angry, exhibiting passive-aggressive tendencies.
- **Faulty Thinking** - Sweet Martyr would often "generalize" past hurts into future reality and "magnify" and "personalize" need or also "personalize" as two "martyrs" develop.
- **Unhealed Childhood Hurts** - Sweet Martyr would often have much hurt from unmet emotional/relational needs even though many "surface" needs were met, i.e., "spoiled" but emotionally needy. Outdone may have learned to minimize needs/hurts growing up ... coming to marriage hoping things will change.



Behavioral Games Couples Play

"Frustrated" by Never Enough

Description:

The "Never Enough" game helps keep a relationship "agenda" always on the table; the message to the "frustrated" partner is **"I need you around to keep trying!"** If you only do "this or that" I'll be satisfied or we'll be close... is the message from "Never Enough." But when the spouse does "this or that," Never Enough finds something else to be dissatisfied about and the game continues. "Frustrated" may become **angry, give up or seek appreciation elsewhere**. Never Enough may often not even realize this game is going on.

Example:

Never Enough: I wish we had more money to spend on the house.

Frustrated: My overtime schedule starts next week so we'll be able to buy some things.

Never Enough: I can't think of where I'd like for us to go eat.

Frustrated: Let's go here tonight; we usually enjoy it.

Never Enough: (During dinner) I didn't want to come here; this is awful.

"Benefits:"

"Never Enough" may be unconsciously played by the **overly needy** partner who needs attention, security or intimacy but searches for them through a partner's performance. This game may also be prompted by "Never Enough's" fear that the spouse will not be motivated to "give" without constant messages of dissatisfaction. As long as the couple continues to play, this fear doesn't have to be faced.

"Frustrated" may continue to play out of a need for appreciation or approval.

Opportunities to Stop Playing

I. Disengaging from the Game

The **"Never Enough"** player can disengage in the following way:

1. Think through what you already have to be grateful for
Example: Complete a Journal of Gratefulness.
2. Express appreciation privately and publicly to your spouse.
Example: Appreciation exercises; I really appreciate you for _____.
3. Think through your top three current "wishes"/express them/appreciate them when fulfilled
Example: "Wish" List exercise; I think I would really enjoy _____
4. The Game is Over!



The "**Frustrated**" player can disengage in the following way:

1. Express your commitment
Example: I'm deeply committed to be supportive and available to you; to be the spouse God wants me to be.
2. Express your need
Example: It means so much to me when I sense your appreciation and acceptance of my efforts to support you. Could you acknowledge my efforts in (share specifics)?
3. Express your appreciation
Example: Thanks for noticing my efforts in (share specifics). Your appreciation really motivates me.
4. The Game is Over!

II. Address Underlying Issues

- **Unmet Needs** - Never Enough often has many unmet emotional needs—but seeks to feel special or secure through a spouse's performance; to feel secure the performance must continue. Frustrated often needs approval.
- **Unhealed Marital Hurts** - Never Enough may have unhealed hurts which are to be "made up for" by a spouse's performance; Forgiveness might be verbalized but not really given until performance occurs; Frustrated may express passive-aggressive anger. Fear would be common in both.
- **Faulty Thinking** - Never Enough might "personalize" disappointments into personal rejections or "polarize" in expecting perfect performance; "Generalizing" past hurts into the future would be common. Frustrated might "personalize" any expressed need as criticism and "magnify" criticisms.
- **Unhealed Childhood Hurts** - Never Enough often missed much but may have developed a self-sufficient performance to "cope"—thus the pressure for a spouse to "perform" also. Frustrated may have missed out on approval and acceptance, feeling a conditional pressure to perform.



Marriage Staff Meeting - Session 9

In addition to any calendar coordination, planning, goal evaluation you need to do, set aside at least one hour to discuss your responses to the following:

1. After reviewing the games described in this session, the game I often see myself playing is the _____ game.
The specific role I most often play is _____.
2. Looking back on my family of origin, the game(s) I saw played most often were _____.
3. Reflecting on the games you saw modeled and have identified above, recognize that you may have a tendency to repeat the games you observed or experienced as a child, or you may react the opposite way. (For example, your parents may have played the "Blame Game." Now as an adult, you may have that same tendency toward blaming, or you may try to avoid all conflict by playing the "Hooked by Nothing's Wrong" game.) Discuss these two possibilities with your spouse. Now circle the appropriate word in this sentence:

"I tend to *repeat* / *do the opposite of* the games I observed in my family."
4. When I play the role of _____ what I really need is _____ . (Remember the Top 10 Intimacy Needs: Acceptance, Affection, Appreciation, Approval, Attention, Encouragement, Comfort, Respect, Security, and Support. Look at the appropriate game sheet for suggestions as well.)
5. In order to stop playing this game, I can _____ .

During their time of sharing, couples should focus on their own behaviors or need to change. This is not the time to point out observations you've made about your spouse, unless your spouse asks for your perspectives. Listen carefully, using frequent eye contact and offering supportive words.

Remember to respond to emotion with emotion. Close your meeting by each praying that God would enable you to put the "game-stopping" behaviors (#5) into practice. Also ask God to especially help you to vulnerably communicate your own needs (Item# 4) as well as helping you to meet your partner's needs from item # 4.